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# The geopolitical meaning of a contemporary visual arts upsurge on the Canada-US border

## WHY SEEK A VISUAL UNDERSTANDING OF BORDERS?

Their common border can be seen as a synecdoche of the complex relations between Canada and the United States: not only is it the longest border in the world (at 8,891 kilometres—5,061 kilometres on land and 3,830 kilometres at sea), but it also represents a line where strong and soft politics and geopolitics converge. One can say that the border not only divides the two states but reflects their relations. Until recently, the border was considered one of the most “benign” the world—an exceptional label, considering the

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border's length.<sup>1</sup> For over two centuries, political divisions between the two countries, inherited in part from a colonial divide in the east but also from the outcome of frontier competition in the west, did not represent an obstacle to everyday life in the border regions. In fact, various economic activities have benefitted from the proximity of different fiscal regimes, from houses built on the line in order to evade taxation, to the more complex industrial systems, such as that of the automobile industry in the Great Lakes region. These activities have led to the consolidation of a number of cross-border regions, enhanced by NAFTA, which are witnesses to both the vitality and variety of interactions along the line.<sup>2</sup>

Culture is generally viewed as one of the many components of a regional dynamic: the border between Canada and the United States has a history of cultural hybridity, which appears so self-evident that the border has been much less studied than that separating the US from Mexico.<sup>3</sup> This cultural similarity is due as much to proximity as to a relatively peaceful history (no war has opposed the two countries on their homelands since the Anglo-American conflict of 1812-1814) and a common European, Anglo-dominated origin, which (with the exception of Québec) leaves Canada and the US with a shared language. Yet the construction of complex sets of values resulting from nation-building on both sides of the line has led to cultural differentiation (although First Nations territorialities still partly straddle the line). In fact, culture in the border regions can be a good indicator of border changes between the countries.

In spite of the closeness of cultural identities in the border regions, group differentiation has occurred over the divide and can be noted through the material expression of ideas. It has been said that on borders, culture “mitigates constantly to enable interaction while maintaining sovereignty.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, considering that culture consists of “differing arrays of power

1 Victor Konrad and Heather N. Nicol, *Beyond Walls: Re-Inventing the Canada-United States Borderlands* (London: Ashgate, 2008).

2 Government of Canada, *The Emergence of Cross-Border Regions between Canada and the United States: Reaping the Promise and Public Value of Cross-Border Regional Relationships: Final Report* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2008).

3 David Stirrup and Gillian Roberts, “Introduction to the ARCS Special Issue on Culture and the Canada–Us Border,” *ARCS* 40, no. 3 (2010): 321-325.

4 Victor Konrad and Heather N. Nicol, “Border Culture, the Boundary between Canada and the United States of America, and the Advancement of Borderlands Theory,” *Geopolitics* 16, no. 1 (2011): 70-90.

that organizes society in this way, and not that,” cultural analysis can provide insight into the societal effects of a border system.<sup>5</sup>

The changes that have recently affected the Canada-US border are symptomatic of post-9/11 bilateral relations, as well as indicators of more general geopolitical trends. In a context of boundary enhancement that has restricted passage in regions that used to be highly integrated, new kinds of artistic expression are emerging that attest to significant cultural change. Artistic activities are generally granted to be a central component of cultural dynamics. In this paper I examine the emergence of contemporary art production in the borderlands between Canada and the United States since 9/11. I treat this emergence as a marker of cultural responses to the securitization processes of the past decade, choosing visual arts (paintings, photographs, videos, and performances) because these forms in particular lend themselves to depictions of spatiality and geography. The purpose of the research project on which this article is based was to discover whether a general aesthetic tendency can be observed in borderlands, which are becoming one of the main loci of contemporary visual artistic activity, and whether the art in these border regions comments on “rebordering”—changes in the regulations and understood definitions of borders.<sup>6</sup>

Considering the difficulty of analyzing this tremendously long borderline in an exhaustive way, I chose to concentrate on both of its extremities, basing field work in the Québec-Vermont region, as well as in the British Columbia-Washington State Cascadia. These boundary segments have both been traced along latitudinal parallels (the 45<sup>th</sup> in the east and the 49<sup>th</sup> in the Pacific region); they are also among the more densely populated borderlands (with notable differences, though, between the urban outskirts of Vancouver and the rural eastern lands). In regions marked by a notable north-south asymmetry, we have concentrated on Canadian border “artscapes.”

Whether figurative or not, contemporary art is not intended to represent reality: its emotional power is in its potential to trigger thoughtful or emotional reactions in spectators; its performing capacity can make us feel what it tackles. The materiality of the art project appeals to our sense of space; thus we examine borders through the perspective of what can be qualified

5 Donald Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 74.

6 Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirmis: Geography's Visual Vulture* (London: Routledge, 2000); Anne-Laure Amilhat-Szary, “Border Art and the Politics of Art Display,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, forthcoming (2013).

as non-representational geography.<sup>7</sup> Through analysis of these projects, I hypothesize that the visual art upsurge in the borderlands between Canada and the United States represents a strong reaction to a rebordering, which this art both enacts and denounces.

#### ART ON THE BORDER OF SOUTHERN QUÉBEC



Various villages were built in the Vermont-Québec borderlands prior to the demarcation of the line around rivers and mills that united local life.<sup>8</sup> The region was occupied by people of European origin, who came north from the first colonies and the Tomifobia Valley; it then developed as a stagecoach route between Boston and Montréal. The case of Stanstead, Québec (the Rock Island district especially), and Derby Line, Vermont, presents two interesting and illustrating landmarks—Canusa (i.e., Canada-USA) Street and the Haskell Library. Canusa Street is a linear road with one sidewalk in each country. Because it runs alongside the border without crossing it, it has not been closed, despite recent enforcement measures that have imposed barriers in many of the streets of the bi-national village. Border officials who hold the two control points located at the street curve however advise against crossing without papers.

The Haskell Library is world-famous not only because it straddles the border but because the public building is crossed with a line of black tape that has been stuck on the floor to materialize the separation. The building was designed in 1901 by a Canadian widow in the memory of her late American husband, Stewart Haskell, and inaugurated in 1904. At the time, official authorization for this kind of political anomaly was not hard to obtain. The authorization of the erection of the Haskell Library shortly preceded the establishment of the International Boundary Commission, which systematically controlled the line (through the 1908 treaty and subsequent 1925 commission). The black line in the library is much more recent, and some say it was drawn after a fire that required insurance companies from both sides to separate their clients' assets clearly. The library is described as the only library in Québec without doors, since the entrance is via Vermont, and the only library in Vermont without books, since books are stored on

7 Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008).

8 Frédéric Lasserre, Patrick Forest, and Enkeleda Arapi, "Politique de Sécurité et Villages-Frontière entre États-Unis et Québec," *Cybergeo: European Journal of Geography* 595, 3 March 2012, [www.cybergeo.revues.org](http://www.cybergeo.revues.org).

the Canadian side. The fact that library patrons from both sides of the community can still use the bi-national equipment without going through border procedures is highly exceptional in the context of enclosure that has led to the erection of barriers blocking the local roads in the Rock Island sector.

Cultural responses to these border changes reflect the contrasting realities of communities recently divided. While the Stanstead Historical Society documented the border's surveying saga (for a 2011 exhibition at the Colby-Curtis Museum that it organized), a young regional curator, Geneviève Chevalier, convinced the Foreman Gallery at Bishop's University, Sherbrooke to undertake a twofold exhibition project titled, "Stanstead project or how to cross the border." The initiative was developed over two years and included a 2011 gallery event in Sherbrooke, the university town closest to the border (approximately 55 kilometres away) and a second phase in 2012—an in-situ initiative in Stanstead itself. "This project will unravel at once in the gallery as well as on the Canada-US border in the town of Stanstead, where recent events have transformed the ordinary lives of citizens who, since generations, have crossed the border on a daily basis. A reflection on the notion of borders, but also on migration, this project will bring together artists whose work is interested in the world in which we are evolving."<sup>9</sup>

Both creative and pedagogical, the project gave the community access to two well-known border artists' work, while commissioning in-situ productions. The public was thus given access to two seminal pieces, a video called "Performing the border" (1999), by Swiss artist Ursula Biemann, and "Green border," a film that was the showpiece of an installation presented by Christian Philippe Müller, a Swiss artist living in New York, at the Austrian pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 1993, where the film made headlines since it was perceived to be representing a threat to national identity. Biemann's work explores human exploitation in borderlands, especially women's work in factories in the Canada-US border region and the sex industry on the US-Mexico border at Juarez/El Paso (in "Performing the Border," 1999) as well as the "sexualization" of the border between Spain and North Africa (in "Europlex," 2003). She has become known for what she calls 'video

9 Excerpt from the curator's statement, [www.destinationsherbrooke.com](http://www.destinationsherbrooke.com). See also Geneviève Chevalier, "'Projet Stanstead ou comment traverser la frontière': l'exposition comme plateforme d'exploration, de réflexion et d'échange," presentation at the Border Regions in Transition Conference, Geneva/Grenoble, 6-9 September 2012.

essays,' films mixing documentary images and scripted voice or quoted texts, through which she reveals how the border is embodied by those living in the communities it crosses.

C.P. Müller's work appears to be less violent, representing bucolic, though illegal, crossing of the lines (for example, a person walks across the Alpine border through flowery spring meadows, bypassing control points); but Müller's challenging of Austrian nationalism in an official art event was widely attacked. His 2010 piece presented at Sherbrooke titled "Burning Love—Lodenfüßler" is a performance and installation with video. It screens a chain of 20 people linked through a long woven textile, in which the artist has cut holes for the people's heads, walking through the Austrian countryside. This site-specific project draws a parallel between European and American borders by showing how human constructs arbitrarily cut through historical landscapes. In a different manner, the four pieces focus on the movement across borders—flows that recent enforcement tends to prevent between Canada and the United States.

Accompanying this first section of the exhibition was the work commissioned of a young landscape photographer from Montréal, Andreas Rutkauskas, as an initial exploration of the "hardening" of the border. Rutkauskas took long walks around Stanstead to get a better understanding of the transformation of the village's situation. The central part of this work consists of large black and white photographs that "focus on the wilderness-border zone, and stand in sharp contrast to the difficulties of crossing the boundary within the rural centre," depicting a recent phenomenon in an old photographic style.<sup>10</sup> He describes the recent hardening of the border as disruptive: "New border policies across the world are having repercussions all the way in Stanstead, where people have routinely crossed the border for generations going back to the late 18th century, some with family members on both sides of it."<sup>11</sup> A final component, a video called "Walk the Line," stages the artist as he circulates in a void space cut into the woods, emphasizing the region's lost unity, as well as a new feeling that those in the region are under surveillance by border systems. A GPS device records all data from Rutkauskas's walk along the international boundary between two boundary milestones that are systematically drawn on a folded sheet that creates an archive.

<sup>10</sup> See [www.andreasrutkauskas.com](http://www.andreasrutkauskas.com).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

The second phase of the project, presented in the summer of 2012, is based on a yearlong interaction of two Canadian artists with the local community.<sup>12</sup> The works are rooted in some of the emblematic sites of the Stanstead-Derby Line and, notably, the Haskell Library. This site-specific initiative is intended by the curator as a means of favouring the expression of the population's feelings and reactions about boundary control, and as a way "to make explicit the potential impact of repressive policies on a population. By its contextual approach, *Stanstead Project or How to Cross the Border* seeks to push the boundaries of site-specific exhibitions, present a critical look at the role that institutions can play in the community, and ultimately call into question the dominant system."<sup>13</sup>

For these reasons, the participating artists—Raphaëlle de Groot and Althea Thauberger—were chosen on account of their development of participatory methods and their use of interventions with citizen groups. Thauberger is generally interested in what she calls social enclaves, that is to say, people who adopt reclusive lifestyles, often under external pressure. Although she comes from Vancouver and has worked with US soldiers, she started tackling international potentially conflictive spaces such as borderlands after an invitation to the "Insite" bi-national art fair in San Diego-Tijuana in 2005. Thauberger decided to work on the Abenaki nation, an indigenous group whose traditional territory includes the contemporary borderlands, in order for the Abenaki to "meet the border" in the Haskell Library opera room. Her work uses the Abenaki language, which was forbidden by European settlers: by staging this group's idiosyncratic way of "performing" its environment, she asks the audience to react to the forced extinction of the groups' identity. Raphaëlle de Groot works on encounters, which she tries to track through the recollection of both material records and artifacts, as well as stories. The artifacts and stories she gathers around the border form part of a long-term project she started in 2009 titled "Le poids des objets" ("The weight of objects"), a kind of heterogeneous human database, which contrasts with the GPS records set by Andreas Rutkauskas. She builds up what she calls "'performative' exercises that turn others' gaze back onto [herself]" in uneasy situations that challenge those she engages.<sup>14</sup>

The common point of the works brought together by Chevalier is to deal with the border both as a material artifact that crosses landscapes and

12 The paper was written prior to the second part of the exhibition.

13 See [www.destinationsherbrooke.com](http://www.destinationsherbrooke.com).

14 See [www.raphaelledegroot.nl](http://www.raphaelledegroot.nl)





as a process of differentiation that is continuously challenged by human interactions and movements. Although very explicit, this project remains of modest proportions. It is set in a rural part of the country (if not a marginal one, at only 132 kilometres from Montréal), which implies that the project is directed more at the local residents than at metropolitan culture consumers. In this sense, the project's symbolic dimension makes a striking contrast with other border-related artistic projects on the US-Canada border.

#### ART AND BORDER ACROSS CASCADIA

Art on the west coast provides a contrast to our first case study. The urban settings of the Vancouver area, the expansion of which is limited by the Coast Ranges on the one hand, and the strong presence of indigenous groups on the other, seem to reflect a very different relation to the political divide with the United States. This portrait would not be faithful without taking into account a third component that has proven central to the development of a regional art tradition in the Canadian west—the strong transnational networks of various Asian diasporas that have contributed to urban growth.

The view of Vancouver as a terminal city, ending Canada, does not account for the existence of another front, the opening to the Pacific Ocean and the various flows that continuously cross it. The rejection of borders by indigenous people stands alongside a strong tradition of multiculturalism that has found resonance on the west coast. The urban art scene is favourable to works celebrating globalization, dispersal, and the cultural intersections globalization implies—what artists describe as the “shifting cultural terrain from which they arise.”<sup>15</sup> This shifting cultural terrain concerns Asian artists such as Do-Ho Suh, whose art depicts the transportation of his family home to Seoul, and Jin-me Yoon, who present histories of diasporic multiculturalism in Canada. Jayce Salloum draws upon his nostalgic ties to destroyed places in the Middle East.

Visual art developed—and received international recognition—in Vancouver throughout the last century. Various recent exhibitions have retraced this development from the expressionist landscape painters, such as Emily Carr, to the conceptual avant-garde of the 1970s, led by Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall.<sup>16</sup> Commentators usually point at the contrast between the apparent

<sup>15</sup> Vancouver Art Gallery, *Home and Away*, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Vancouver Art Gallery, “Art and Artists 1931-1983: An Inaugural Exhibition in Celebration of the Opening of the New Vancouver Art Gallery at Robson Square, 15 October-31 December 1983,” [www.ccca.ca](http://www.ccca.ca); Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst

isolation of the British Columbia art scene and its synchronicity with global trends. This contrast is usually described as one of the major impulses of what could be called a place effect. Interestingly enough, this place effect has lately been related to similar processes apparent on the rest of the American west coast, where “local cultures evolved around frontier values of individualism and innovation, as well as a hedonistic impulse that shaped, among other things, the west coast’s more experimental manifestation of modernist architecture.”<sup>17</sup> The same combination of influences seems to be at work in the regional native artists who state that the border does not exist, in the sense that the borders of modern states are arbitrary impositions that affect them negatively.

The only first nations artists present at the *Baja to Vancouver* exhibition, however, do not focus on border issues. By sculpting Nike sports shoes into the shape of Aboriginal Northwest Coast masks, Brian Jungen addresses the link between traditional and global cultures without lingering on border issues. The works of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, who uses Coast Salish cosmology and Northwest Coast formal design elements, are a take on western landscape tradition. The hybridization of territorialities, and their complex links to borders, is more apparent in one recent project (unveiled in April 2011 on the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the City of Vancouver) that consisted of an exposition of digital signs on a carefully located billboard.

The “Digital Natives” initiative intended to underline the fact that one of Vancouver’s landmarks, Stanley Park, is in fact located on Skwxwú7mesh territory, now in the heart of town. Artists were asked to write small “Twitter-formatted” statements on the history of the city and its relations to the native and non-native communities. These sentences flashed on the board between commercial ads and “became a space for exchange between native and non-native communities in an exploration of language in public space.”<sup>18</sup> Some of the contributions were translated into the local languages (Skwxwú7mesh, Kwak’wala, and hən’q’əmin’əm/Musqueam). The flashes progressively integrated messages that the public sent through the social networks as answers to the initial posts. One of the contentious messages in

Antwerpen & Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, “Intertidal: Vancouver Art and Artists,” exhibition from 17 December 2005 to 26 February 2006.

17 Ralph Rugoff, in CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Seattle Art Museum, and Vancouver Art Gallery, *Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art*, 2003.

18 See [www.digitalnatives.othersights.ca](http://www.digitalnatives.othersights.ca).

question comes from Edgar Heap of Birds, read: “Imperial Canada awarded sex abuse to native youth by the black robes now proudly bestows bronze silver gold metals with Indian image.” It was part of three “digital natives” messages that were censored by the corporation that owned the billboard. A few days later, “just in time for the Vancouver Marathon, an outcropping of signs appeared.”<sup>19</sup> The incendiary text was also subject to critique from Birds’ people for failing to depart from using colonial language while denouncing “Imperial Canada.”


The west coast artistic scene treats the disruption of 9/11 in pieces that explicitly address the border issues. A 2010 exhibition titled “Border Zones” at the Vancouver Museum of Anthropology showed the climax of that disruption. Curated by Karen Duffek, a specialist of Pacific Northwest cultures, the exhibition aimed to renew popular views of traditional cultures through the work of twelve contemporary international artists. Duffek explains that she derived the title “Border Zones” from her sense from working with Aboriginal communities that these groups had developed an expression of the will to strengthen their surrounding borders in order to gain protection. (Treaty making could be said to play this role.) In this context, Duffek’s first concern was to break disciplinary borders and to set Aboriginal art free from the straitjackets usually imposed upon it, to “stop doing shows about north west coast art” and “look at conceptual aspects” that could bring contemporary art to her museum.<sup>20</sup> She wanted to demonstrate that the “MOA, as an anthropological museum located on traditional Musqueam territory, is involved in a critical re-thinking of the relationships and boundaries among cultural institutions, originating communities, knowledge systems, and collections of art and ethnology.”<sup>21</sup> Quoting Edward Said, Duffek stated that borders represent “uncertain spaces, where our understandings of identity and place may be strengthened or transformed—and where new narratives are being created as cultural and geographical borders diverge and collide.” She recalls that the initial title that she offered to the museum board was “Boundary & Translation,” but that they finally opted for a more spatialized vision of the project, although “Border Zones” was hard to accept by some who thought it sounded too “war-like.”

Borders suggest the potential for conflict, even when relations are peaceful. This point is remarkable in the works of another Vancouver visual

19 Ibid.

20 Interview with author, May 2011.

21 See [www.moa.ubc.ca](http://www.moa.ubc.ca).

artist, Ron Terada. His material is often made of various forms of signage, which he repositions both within the gallery and through interventions in the public sphere. In two urban projects, *Entering City of Vancouver* (2002) and *You Have Left the American Sector* (2005), he has used “large highway-type signs which seek to heighten the idea of a border and to suggest a symbolic change within the landscape.”<sup>22</sup> The first sign looks like a road sign marking a town entrance. This piece is not made to be shown in peri-urban landscapes but in gallery settings, where the sign  territorializes Terada's de-territorialized city, which was threatened by homogenizing urban renewal.

Terada's second project, *You Have Left the American Sector / Vous Etes Sorti du Secteur Americain*, is more provocative. The billboard, inspired from words on a sign in front of the famous Check-Point Charlie that divided Cold War Berlin, has been deported by the artist to the border between the United States and Canada. The tense has changed from the present, as it was written in Berlin, to the past, where it is now in Windsor (and has lost two languages, Russian and German, in the transfer): “Terada's statement echoed as a series of interrogative variations: Have you left the American Sector? Is it possible to do so? And what is an American Sector in an escalating climate of security and remote control?”<sup>23</sup> Initially projected as part of a temporary sculpture exhibition in Windsor's waterfront sculpture park and commissioned by the Windsor Art Gallery (and thus funded and encouraged by a number of public stakeholders), the sculpture was dismantled by city employees five days after they erected it because of the controversy it incited. The sign had become what Lee Rodney calls a “representational dilemma.” Although it was not displayed on the border itself but in an urban context, the fact that the sign faced Detroit was perceived by some in Windsor as a potential public offense to Americans.

Interestingly enough, the sculpture's story does not end there: the work was bought by a Vancouver amateur who, at the beginning of 2011, set it in his garden in a cozy neighborhood, the University Endowment Lands. His neighbours subsequently appealed to public authorities to remove what they referred to as an “inappropriate structure.” The owner has tried to defend the sculpture on the grounds that it is a significant work of art that conveys the uneasiness of border divides and perceived US domination.

22 Interview with author, April 2012.

23 Lee Rodney, “Road Signs on the Border: Transnational Anxiety and the Rebordering of North America,” *Space and Culture* 14, no. 4 (2011): 384 - 397.

## CONCLUSION

Visual art on the Canadian side of the US border both enacts and denounces a perceived “re-bordering” largely by the growing use of surveillance systems around the border line. Both individual works of art and exhibitions reflect a changing perception of borderlands that used to—but may no longer—function as differentiated but complementary spaces. The reference to external cases, such as Cold War Berlin’s Check-Point Charlie, present both in Ron’s Terada Windsor project and in the name of a café facing a new border entry post in Stanstead, Québec, is a testament to the fact that some Canadians feel that their relation to the border is no longer based on exceptional cultural proximity to and economic integration with the US, but rather on security frames that define a new global border regime.

Through their creative approaches, artists introduce disruptive objects into environments they intend to both transform and better understand. The purpose of a material understanding of these productions is to focus on the sensitive reactions that contemporary visual art not only expresses but also provokes. In this sense, the artists we have followed on the Canada-US border work to make local populations more aware of the changes that the hardening of the border has caused in their lives. This process does not echo only in new narratives, but is rooted in the material transformations that the art installations and encounters allow. In this sense, the social interactions that contemporary art stimulates allow for a transformation of the political understanding of space in the conflictive zone that the US-Canada border has become since 9/11.